

# How Your Baby's Heart May be Monitored During Labor

**T**hey call it “labor” for a good reason. Labor is hard work, not just for you, but for your baby too! To see how well your baby is bearing the strain, his or her heart may be monitored during labor using special equipment. This is called fetal heart rate monitoring. Understanding the techniques that may be used can let you know what to expect and help you make the right choices for yourself and your baby.

## Why is fetal heart rate monitoring done?

Fetal heart rate monitoring tells your health care providers how your baby is doing during labor and birth. Certain changes in the baby's heart rate may indicate the baby is in distress, or is having a hard time. Fetal heart rate monitoring doesn't prevent problems from occurring, but it lets your health care providers know something may be wrong so they can intervene quickly to help.

## What techniques are used for fetal heart rate monitoring?

There are several techniques that can be used:

- **Auscultation:** With this technique, the clinician listens to the baby's heart at set points during labor. There are two ways to listen:
  - With a fetoscope, which is like a stethoscope, that is pressed against your abdomen
  - With a Doppler device, which is pressed against your abdomen. The device uses a form of ultrasound to convert sound waves into signals from your baby's heart that you and your health care providers will be able to hear.

This is a noninvasive “low risk” technique, and there are no risks involved.

- **Electronic fetal monitoring:** This method uses special equipment to see how your

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baby's heart responds to the contractions of your uterus. There are two techniques for this:

- *External monitoring*—In this method, the health care provider places some conducting jelly on your abdomen and then straps a pair of belts around you. One belt holds an electronic device that will pick up the baby's heartbeat and record it on a paper strip. The other belt holds a pressure gauge that monitors the frequency of your contractions. Together, these two pieces of information show how well your baby is tolerating the stress of your contractions. This test is done completely



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through the skin and is not invasive. It involves no risk to you or your baby.

- *Internal monitoring*—In this method, a small device is inserted through your vagina and cervix and is placed on the baby's scalp. A wire is strapped to your thigh and attached to a heart monitor. Internal monitoring can be used only after your water has broken and your cervix has dilated enough. It is usually used when

Abnormal fetal heart rates or patterns do not necessarily mean that your baby is in distress. But they will signal your health care provider to take another step to make sure that your baby is fine.

Health care providers have varying opinions about which fetal heart monitoring methods should be used and when. Talk with yours to decide what is best for you. That way you can work out a plan that you're both comfortable with for bringing your baby safely into the world.

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external monitoring isn't working well. There is a slight risk of infection and fetal scalp bruising with internal monitoring.

### Talking with your health care provider

It's common for the fetal heart rate to decrease a bit during a contraction. That's because the compression caused by the contraction briefly reduces the blood supply from the placenta to the baby. But your baby's heart rate should recover quickly after the contraction stops.

### RESOURCES

- The National Women's Health Information Center  
<http://womenshealth.gov/pregnancy>
- American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists  
[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)